


*A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada.*View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.ukbrought to you by  CORE

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From one of Canada's foremost essayists John Ralston Saul comes a new 2008 book *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*. Iconoclastic Ralston Saul follows the older philosophical tradition of ruminating on a topic to open it for public discussion rather than the strictly empirical tradition of intellectual scholarship evidenced by citation rigor. In this format, Ralston Saul poses a disarmingly simple yet challenging thesis that disrupts the status quo of popular thinking about the origins of Canada's predisposition toward inclusive egalitarianism and the balancing of individual and group rights.

The thesis is this: Canada is a Métis civilization that has been inspired by centuries of Aboriginal society that preceded the eras of Western colonialism, immigration, industrialization, and globalization. Canada's predispositions do not come solely from the French or the English, or more recently the Americans—whether it is specific notions of liberalism, justice, individualism, (social) democracy, and citizenship, or our ethical and emotional engagements. Saul asserts that Indigenous civilizations have shaped the Canadian way of being and many of our daily policies and practices much more than has ever been acknowledged by political and economic leaders, or in our case, scholars and educators. Ostensibly, then, this is his answer to the philosophical and historical question he asks for rumination: "If our [Canadian] civilization has been built out of the Western inheritance, how is it that the rest of the West is struggling precisely where we find the challenges quite easy?" (p. 4).

Throughout the book he expands on the core ideas that Canada's success as an immigrant-receiving society yielding high levels of cultural diversity per capita can be directly linked to the First Nations, the Métis, and the Inuit. Specifically, woven into the Canadian subconscious are the nonracial and nonlinear ideas of civilization; the idea of community and family as an inclusive circle that continually and dynamically expands; and the ideas of ongoing negotiation, mutual dependency, and partnership. The book is divided into four parts. The first section addresses in more detail his claim that Canada is a Métis civilization and what blocks broader understanding of this; the second section addresses the various origins and concepts of fairness and historical interpretations embedded in the phrase "peace, welfare [fairness or well-being of the citizenry, in his definition], and good government"; the third section examines what he calls "the castrati" or the colonial mindset of the Canadian elites who are steeped in fear and self-loathing manifesting in a

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worship of managerialism over political or economic leadership, failure to deal with pressing fairness issues such as health care and homelessness, tendency to import externally generated ideas, and shrinking from a profiling of Canada's uniqueness and international contributions.

His final argument in the fourth section is that if Canada is to reach its potential, become an intentional civilization, and embrace its unique social organization and international identity, then it must: move past the unconsciousness of Aboriginal influence; past mere verbal recognition of Aboriginal peoples as one of the founding peoples and hence the lack of a sustained conversation; past separation of people and land; past perceptions of tragedy, issues and failures; and past the dominant reactions of sympathy, guilt, sadness, apologies, and denial of who we really are. "Lost in this maze, we cannot see how much of what we are is them, how much of what we think of as our way, our values, our collective unconscious, is dependent on what we slowly absorbed living with them or near them over the centuries" (p. 5).

The ideas that Ralston Saul presents are not new, certainly not in academic discourse, which has been actively addressing the need for preserving diverse epistemological, ontological, and axiological systems for several decades. However, what is new is this coalescence of ideas into a clear thesis written for public discourse to provoke discussion on the nature and identity of Canada. It illuminates a possible new way of viewing ourselves that moves beyond narrow historical narratives slathered with racial and ethnic stereotypes and Eurocentric ambitions. For this it is worth the read, as it will spark fruitful public discourse about the Aboriginal origins of Canada's national character and possibilities for heightening the visibility of Aboriginal models.

My first key issue with this book is not the central thesis, startling to many in the popular press, but that the thesis does not go far enough. Ralston Saul explains that he wrote this book to provide Canadians with a new way to imagine ourselves; however, racism toward and poverty of Aboriginal peoples cannot just be imagined away. As Audre Lorde (1984, cited in West, 1993) suggests, "Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people" (p. 93). Thus this ideational analysis must also be accompanied by a political economic analysis to illustrate how reigning ideas and mythologies operate dialectically with political and economic systems to keep the current systems of injustice and exclusion in place. Unfortunately, this book falls solidly within a liberal framework evidenced by Ralston Saul's assertions that the political elites simply need to take up their proper leadership role, the economic elites need to ensure that the market is used properly largely through domestic ownership, and the Canadian public needs a new social imaginary. Together these form his prescription for Canada's preferred future, falling short of possibilities. Nevertheless, his contribution points toward an explanation for the unique phenomenon in Canadian history where policy choices have more often than not been predicated on negotiation, egalitarianism, cooperation, and accommodation.

His thesis is a double-edged sword, and my second key issue with Ralston Saul is that the structure, tone, and voice of this book violate its intent. The book is written by a non-Aboriginal for the non-Aboriginal population, missing an opportunity to open and effect a dialogue between non-Aboriginal and

Aboriginal peoples. Presumably, he has crafted this thesis from extensive travels with his partner, former Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, to Aboriginal communities on the three oceans and from the words and wisdom of many Aboriginal leaders and elders. Rather than take a multicentric view that acknowledges Indigenous epistemologies/philosophies as distinct, at times he appears to be using elements to buttress the dominance of Western epistemology, an extended form of exploitation so constitutive of strong group boundaries. Overall, the tone indicates his positionality as a member of the elite who is comfortable with talking the talk, conveying limousine liberalism.

My third key issue with Ralston Saul is his love of overgeneralizations. To portray Canada's history as an immigrant-receiving nation as easy and unproblematic overlooks centuries of racist, classist, and gendered policies and practices and does a substantial disservice to the intractable issues that this country currently faces. Increasingly large numbers of immigrant and refugee newcomers remain outside "the circle": living in poverty, unable to communicate well in English, often doing multiple jobs far below their education, losing children to the worst elements in our society, and lacking access to appropriate credentialing and postsecondary education. Although he acknowledges these issues, he considers the resolution a relatively easy task with inspired leadership, which belies the difficulties that immigrant-serving agencies face daily. Also, a more nuanced version of the tensions and debates in Aboriginal societies would have portrayed better the complexities that comprise intragroup and intergroup dialogue and inter-action in Canadian life.

Finally, I affirm his important but sparing comments on the need to move past the urbanized denial of our physical reality and Northern geography toward new understandings that acknowledge: land, ice, and water as inseparable; people as part of the land; spiritual and physical connections to place; Northern and Aboriginal perspectives on governance; and the importance of rerooting ourselves in smaller communities that once again become self-reliant, proud, participatory, economically and socially sustainable, and inclusive.

For teacher educators and educational researchers, this book provides an excellent example of expanding public discourse, and it could be used to stimulate debate among those preparing to be teachers, who will face these issues and social complexity daily. How might such an imaginary of Canadian history and an expansion of knowledge systems affect daily educational practices? This is what this journal issue is addressing, and Ralston Saul does provide some accessible fodder for this kind of historical and educational rethinking that could "re-centre our civilization on that Aboriginal reality" (p. 318). Ralston Saul does address educators and the professoriate briefly near the end of the book by suggesting a renewed focus on the intellectual preparation of the citizenry to question and to risk, as well as stimulate broader global educational connections rather than mimic the *call center* form of education so prevalent in the United States. For the professoriate, he recommends reconceiving the tenure evaluation system to include the category of *social impact*, which he admits is not an original observation. Despite his redundant educational prescriptions and the issues noted above, Ralston Saul will have his own social

impact through a thesis worthy of debate that has the potential to augment existing epistemological and pedagogical discourse.

Reference

West, C. (1993). *Race matters*. New York: Vintage Press.